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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ISTANBUL 000469

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [TU](#)

SUBJECT: ISTANBUL STUDENTS VOICE NUANCED UNDERSTANDING OF
WAR IN IRAQ

[11.](#) (U) Summary: Istanbul pol/econoffs hosted a group of 11 students from Istanbul's Beykent University to discuss current political developments in the Middle East and the Turkish/U.S. relationship. The students were unanimously opposed to the war. However, the group demonstrated a nuanced understanding of the U.S./Turkish relationship and a belief that, though they disagree with the war, the press in Turkey and the Middle East has dealt with U.S. policy in a sensationalist manner. End Summary.

[12.](#) (U) On April 1, Pol/econoffs hosted a group of 11 students from newly-established Beykent University's English Language Department. The students (9 women and 2 men) were largely interested in pursuing careers in translation, teaching, further study in literature, and public relations. Geographically, most were raised in Istanbul, though two grew up in the Southeast, one on the Black Sea coast, and several others lived for many years in the Aegean region. One of the girls wore a headscarf (technically not permitted in universities by the Higher Board of Education, but often ignored at private universities). Two of the students were dual nationals: one Turkish-American, and one Turkish-Israeli.

War and Media

[13.](#) (U) Though the subject of the war in Iraq took up only a portion of the two-hour discussion, students immediately stated, unanimously, that they were against the war. However, they were quick to distance themselves from any sympathy with the Iraqi regime. In essence, one student said, the decision to act without a clearer UN mandate, and not give inspections further time, was what they disagreed with.

[14.](#) (U) When asked about media coverage in Turkey, students acknowledged that the U.S. had been subject to a host of wild conspiracy theories. Students pointed to fanciful press articles, such as: allegations that the new consulate's location has a darker purpose (one paper suggested that the location was perfect for monitoring traffic on the Bosphorus; another said flights to Ataturk International Airport would be monitored from "the hilltop fortress"); visa and immigration policies were specifically anti-Muslim; and U.S. interest in Turkey's Southeast is to encourage an independent Kurdistan. Students pointed out that, ultimately, Turks were harmed by the sensationalist approach of the media.

American Intentions

[15.](#) (U) Poloff asked whether the students believed the United States was "well-intentioned" in using military force against Saddam. Most of the students did not offer a clear opinion in either direction: one said he believed the American people meant well, but that military commanders might be less well-intentioned. Another student said that while she had questions about U.S. motives, she knew that "Saddam is no saint." The question of civilian casualties, heavily reported in Turkish media, weighed heavily on the students' minds.

AKP and the Vote

[16.](#) (U) Pointing to the failed Turkish Parliament vote to allow U.S. troops to transit Turkey for Northern Iraq, several students said AKP's "mismanagement" was to blame for the narrow defeat. Students also pointed to "playing politics for too long" as a concern, blaming the military, CHP, and AKP for the miscalculation and subsequent damage to U.S.-Turkish relations. At the same time, several students

said, they believe the long-term U.S.-Turkish relationship will remain strong.

Comment

17. (U) Students displayed both a healthy skepticism of local press coverage and a nuanced understanding of political machinations in Ankara. Unprompted, the students offered an analysis of AK which was highly refined: balancing populist promises to their supporters while trying to grapple with complex international relationships and economic management. While not representative of all segments of Turkish society, the students offered a window into Turkish youth's view of the war. End comment.
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